

# TELEPATHY COULD BE REAL

Though 58% of all Americans believe they have had telepathic experiences, researchers are just now beginning to corner it. The people they study, talented telepathic receivers, produce results that defy mere luck.

by Paul Chance

MARK TWAIN, the author of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* and a member of the Psychical Society of England, was especially interested in "mental telegraphy." His interest grew out of dozens of personal experiences too freakish to write off as anything but telepathy. In 1878 he wrote, "Doubtless the something which conveys our thoughts through the air from brain to brain is a finer and subtler form of electricity, and all we need do is to find out how to capture it and how to force it to do its work, as we have had to do in the case of the electric currents. Before the day of telegraphs neither of these marvels would have seemed any easier to achieve than the other."

We're now in the age of television and the videophone, and researchers are still trying to capture the elusive telepathic force.

The trouble is that telepathy won't stand still. Parapsychologists are like modern Leeuwenhoeks peering through primitive microscopes at tiny creatures dancing in swamp water. Each time somebody calls out, "I've got the little bugger; come take a look," the little bugger slips out of view or hides under a blade of swamp grass. The fact that lots of people are jeering

that it's all swamp grass doesn't make the work any easier.

**Disappearing Act.** One of the paradoxes of this spooky field is that while researchers cannot reliably demonstrate that extrasensory perception (ESP) exists, they can count on it to go away. Time after time, people who initially show psychic talent lose their skill as the researchers study them, and their success scores drop. The phenomenon is so dependable that parapsychologists call it the decline effect. Critics point to it as evidence that there was never anything paranormal to begin with; sometimes a person will get lucky, but eventually the laws of chance win out. Parapsychologists aren't convinced, because the beginning scores are often so high that it is difficult to believe that luck has anything to do with it.

Charles Tart, of the University of California at Davis, is trying something that may explain the decline effect and, at the same time, give the researcher a way to nail psychic phenomena down flat.

Tart wondered if people with telepathic talent weren't being put on what learning theorists call an extinction schedule. That information that peck a key for food will eventually stop

if his efforts go unrewarded. If a psychic reads a couple of hundred telepathic messages without a payoff, he's on an extinction schedule. What parapsychologists ought to do, Tart argues, is put the psychically gifted on a reinforcement schedule.

The payoff might consist simply of telling the psychic when he has scored a hit. But Tart warns that the pupil should have some psychic ability to begin with. No matter how good a training program is, you can't teach a dog to fly or a pigeon to bark. To develop someone into a reliable psychic performer a researcher must start with a person who has at least a little ESP.

**Striving Psychics.** To find the talented minority, Tart screened over 1,500 college students. Of these, 138 showed promise; these were further screened to cull those who might have been lucky on the first tests. Twenty-five of Tart's most promising students went on to complete the main study.

The psychic's job was to guess which one of a series of lights would go on. A sender, not one of the gifted 25, sat in another room; he would get an early warning of which light was about to go on. That information was sent mentally to the receiver, who sat in



scores at other times and found a significant difference. The husband's scores, meanwhile, were virtually identical in both conditions (see the chart at bottom of this page).

In another series of games, Fouts's Scribbage-playing telepather tried to help as well as interfere with his wife's performance. As before, negative thoughts seemed to produce lower scores, but attempts to raise her scores failed.

The victim in these Scribbage studies was not aware of her husband's efforts, or even that an experiment was under way. Fouts admits that the interference that took place might have come from nonverbal cues, such as changes in the husband's body posture, rather than from telepathic influence. It is interesting to note, however, that during the interference sessions the wife sometimes commented, "I can't think . . . my mind is blank."

Researchers have tried to strengthen other paranormal skills such as precognition and clairvoyance. In general, their efforts have supported the notion that paranormal skills can be enhanced, or at least maintained, with feedback. But Tart is quick to admit

that even his best students did not show the rapid improvement you might expect with more ordinary skills. What's needed, he argues, is more sophisticated feedback. Even a talented person gets little information from being told that he guessed correctly. A pat on the head tells him he did something right, but it doesn't tell him what that something was.

**Brain Signals.** The problem is further complicated by the fact that some guesses are just that, guesses. But the psychic has no way of knowing when a correct answer came from psychic insight and when it was just a lucky stab. To beat that problem, researchers will have to find a psychic indicator, perhaps a kind of cerebral knee-jerk like the response a brain makes to a sudden noise. Each time the brain signaled the arrival of a telepathic message, the researcher could cue the psychic. This way, the psychic should be able to learn to distinguish extraordinary intuition from ordinary coincidence.

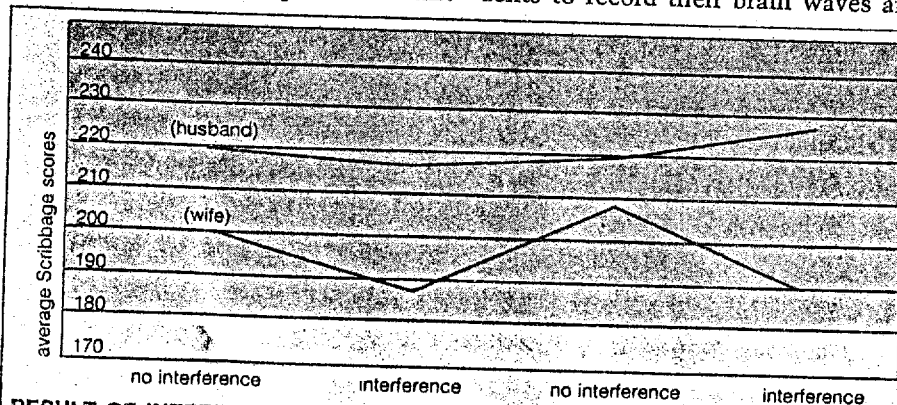
There's some evidence that the brain does know more than it's telling us. Charles Tart wired up 11 college students to record their brain waves and

left them alone. Tart then went to another room and wired himself to a machine that gave him electric shocks at random intervals. The idea was to see whether the students' brain waves would be different when Tart was getting jolted than when he wasn't. They were. The difference wasn't the sort that would leap out at you from the pattern of wavy lines on an electroencephalograph, but a piece of equipment called a Period Analyzer picked it up. We're still a long way from having a psychic thermometer, but researchers at Stanford Research Institute in Palo Alto, California intend to continue the search.

In a recent poll conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, 58 percent of those surveyed said that they believed they had had one or more telepathic experiences. But even the baptized believer in parapsychology has to admit that it is a field with some mushy ground. It is hard to find a study that doesn't have a lot of ifs and maybes in it. And psychic researchers rarely have the hard, oaklike quality of pigeon-tutor B.F. Skinner or neuro-psychologist D.O. Hebb.

The conversation of parapsychologists is apt to shift from the mysteries of the Bermuda Triangle to the Loch Ness Monster. The temptation is to latch onto one of these low-credibility subjects and dismiss telepathy and related phenomena as the psychedelic mentations of a spooky group. Just file them away with the witches, the shamen and the root doctors, and forget them.

**Inflating Our Flat World.** But remember that in the early 1960s just about everybody was convinced that the yogi miracle workers were fakes. Those skinny fellows with their fruit and nut



**RESULT OF INTERFERENCE** The higher scores of the husband show little change, while the wife's scores dipped when the husband tried to interfere telepathically.

Telepathy (Continued from page 44.)

diets and their white robes and put their guts through gymnastic workouts. A few scientists studied them as they altered their blood pressure or changed the temperature of their hands, but almost no one believed that what they did could really be done. Sloppy research. Clever trickery. Any intelligent, educated person *knew* that it was impossible, for example, to voluntarily control one's blood pressure. Then Neal Miller and other psychologists taught people to do just that.

**Their Insides Upside Down.** The success of Miller et al. did more than change our ideas about the nuts and bolts of the nervous system; it inflated our flat world into a sphere connecting East and West. And if the heart-stopping feat of S3, who outguessed Tart's machine at odds of 2,500,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000, to one? No honest statistician can shrug that off as a run of good luck. No, we're right where we were 15 years ago when those skinny yogis turned their insides upside down. Either it's a hoax, or it's real.

We probably won't have an answer to that question until some tough-minded scientist like Neal Miller takes a crack at it. He might simply prove that all those confident, jeering skeptics were right, after all. But it's disconcerting to think that it might come out the other way. Your local high school might one day offer a course in telepathy as it now does in typing. And think of how different your life would be if your thoughts were no longer private property.

Hmmmm. I see you're thinking about it.

Paul Chance joined *psychology today* in 1972 as Manuscripts Editor and became assistant managing editor a year ago. He took a master's degree in counseling from the University of Northern Colorado and a Ph.D. in psychology from Utah State University. A rigorous methodologist, Chance went to Tart's lab to see his telepathy setup. For more information, read:

Tart, Charles T. *Learning to Use ESP*. University of Chicago, in press.

Twain, Mark, "Mental Telegraphy" in *Literary Essays*, Vol. 24, P.F. Collier and Son, 1918.

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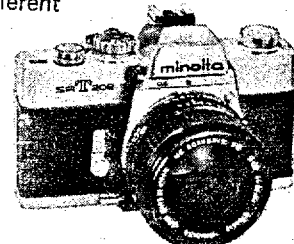
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